Some Approaches in Teaching Reading and Literature

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Dedicated to the Dadaab cohort Secondary English class of 2017.

"The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom
but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind."

— Kahlil Gibran

Forward

This book is written for individuals preparing to be teachers who are registered in the Dadaab Secondary Teacher Education diploma program offered by the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, Canada) and Moi University (Eldoret, Kenya). This book specifically addresses the content of the course titled "English and Reading: Secondary" (EDUC 280).

Contents

Introduction

This book has been prepared as a companion volume for a teacher preparation course offered in Dadaab, Kenya. The course provides a general overview of the theory and practice of teaching reading and literature to secondary students, with a particular focus on the Kenyan context.

This course proceeds from the assumption that teachers are expected to be able to create lively and engaging learning activities for a range of students and to support their understanding and interpretation of a variety of academic texts, including literary texts in print, oral and multimedia forms. The Kenyan Secondary English curriculum states that literature is important because it

1) provides genuine and expressive samples of language in context;
2) provides a rich context in which learners can acquire new vocabulary and knowledge of the rich possibilities of language use;
3) increases communicative competence of readers;
4) develops learners' critical thinking;
5) gives a window on life (values, conflicts, human nature); and,
6) is a good avenue to providing suggestions on how to resolve life challenges. (KCSE English Syllabus)

In this course, we will consider these benefits while pursuing the following course objectives.

Course Objectives

Course participants will review, consider, and discuss topics such as the following:

- Literature selection and justification of literature selection
- Curriculum design, focusing particularly on the KCSE English Syllabus
- Planning for instruction
- Approaches to teaching literature, including cultural, language-based, personal-growth, and reader-response models
- Strategies for engaging students in responding to literature
- Strategies for supporting struggling readers
- Approaches to assessment and evaluation in English literature classrooms

Statement of Inclusion[1]

Education is a multidisciplinary field that brings together faculty, teacher candidates and students from diverse academic and personal backgrounds, ways of learning, communicating and responding. This diversity is an intellectual asset. Inclusive language (that is, language that avoids the use of certain expressions or words that exclude particular groups of people) is used in this book and in other course materials, and is expected of all course participants. Students, instructors, visitors, readings and media in Education courses may raise controversial issues. All learners and educators are to be treated respectfully at all times and in all interactions. Disagreements may occur among course participants; in such cases, debates should proceed in the spirit of informed and respectful academic discussion, with attention to the fact that this learning environment is an inclusive, safe space for all. You are encouraged to contact your instructor and any teaching assistants to let them know if you have any special learning needs or preferences, and also to clarify your prefered name and how you wish to be addressed.

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1 This statement is adapted from the University of British Columbia Faculty of Education "Possible Inclusion Statements for Course Outlines". Available: http://teach.educ.ubc.ca/teacher-education-for-all/

Literature Selection: Writing rationales as a thoughtful start to thinking about and planning instruction

Christopher Brumfit once wrote that the teaching of literature can be viewed as

> *a means of introducing learners to… a serious view of our world, of initiating them in the process of defining themselves through contact with others' experience. How it is best done, what the relationship between 'reading' and 'literature' needs to be for the greatest number of people to be led to literature, exactly what books are appropriate at what levels – these are questions for teachers to address. But the seriousness of the enterprise should not be doubted. It is only when these reading processes are centrally addressed as processes and when the debate moves away from content to what we do with literary texts, that genuine literary issues can be addressed. (Brumfit, 2001, p. 92)*[2]

Before we consider the Kenyan Curriculum that we'll use as a basis for this course and think about specific strategies in teaching English literature and reading, it is important to consider why we select and teach particular literary texts, as well as to consider the implicit biases of any curricula with which we work. Drawing on Brumfit's writings, Ronald Carter (2007) reminds us that literary text selection is a complex matter that is driven by many forces. This is particularly true in countries with a history of colonization, such as Kenya or Canada. Carter writes of recent shifts in thinking about literature and language instruction in the field of applied linguistics – particularly in relation to how literature fits with language instruction. He observes that we have seen

> *an explosion in work in literary and cultural theory, a development that has provided a strong basis for exploration of the relationship between literature, language and education. Literary theory has embraced many topics, including the nature of an author's intentions, the character and measurement of the responses of a reader, and*

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2 Brumfit, C.J. (2001). *Individual freedom in language teaching.* Oxford University Press, p. 92.

the specific textuality of a literary text. In particular, there has also been a continuing theorisation of the selection of literary texts for study . . . On the one hand, there is a view, widespread still internationally, that the study of English Literature is the study of a select number of great writers judged according to the enduringly serious nature of their examination of the human condition. On the other hand, there is the view that the notion of literature is relative and that ascriptions of value to texts are a transient process dependent on the given values of a given time. How tastes change and evaluations shift as part of a process of canon formation are therefore inextricably bound up with definitions of what literature is and what it is for. In this respect, definitions of literature, and of literary language, are either **ontological** *– establishing an essential, timeless property of what literature or literary language is – or* **functional** *– establishing the specific and variable circumstances within which texts are designated as literary, and the ends to which these texts are and can be used.[3]*

Carter observes that such definitions either embrace or resist the concept of *canon*. The term *canon* here refers to a group of literary texts that are viewed as representing the field, usually because they are deemed most important or of high quality. For example, Shakespeare is often positioned as a key author in the standard "canon" of literature written in English. Many people say Shakespeare holds this key position because his writings are superior to other writings in the English language. As Carter suggests, though, judgements as to quality of literature are not necessarily objective, but reflect the values of particular people in a particular time. Choosing literature, whether for a single classroom or for a national curriculum, is an important process that can have broad societal implications:

> *Certain texts are 'set' for study by examination boards, syllabus designers and teachers of particular courses; in turn, these books are then categorised by publishing houses as canonical or 'classic' texts, and the whole process can serve to define what is considered to be literature . . . Indeed, the notion of a canon of great literary texts is most problematised when national curricula are being evolved and definitions of what constitutes a national heritage are foregrounded. (Carter, 2007)*

Carter suggests that in recent decades canonical texts have been gradually displaced by more contextualized texts and concerns, along with "relative" theories of language and literature (**linguistic relativity**, simply put, has to do with the idea that language one uses on a day-to-day basis shapes one's view of reality in important ways). Still, Carter writes,

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3 Carter, R. (2007). Literature and language teaching 1986–2006: A review. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *17*(1), 3-4.

questions of value and of how and why we value what we value when we read do not easily disappear, and issues of text selection, the literature syllabus and curriculum development are very much alive, especially in the context of English as a global language.

The questions . . . take on a sharper relief when seen in the context of the development of new Englishes and the curricular demands of literature and language teaching pedagogy in emergent contexts of English use. (Carter, 2007)

Recently, Carter continues, key thinkers such as Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Indian linguist Braj Kachru have argued "for a 'decolonisation of the mind' when teaching literature to learners of English in countries such as Kenya and Nigeria where English is associated with the language of a colonising culture" (Carter, 2007). The term **decolonisation** here refers to the the process of undoing colonialism – for example, by including in the curriculum forms of oral literature that are indigenous to the region and valuing those texts as greatly as other texts. Ultimately, the predominant view in the present moment is that literary texts are "socially, culturally and historically variable," and that we should include among the texts we teach those that have relevance and importance to students in their daily lives. One outcome of this way of thinking is the introduction of a much greater variety of texts and text-types into language and literature classrooms so that "literary texts are studied alongside advertisements, newspaper reports, magazines, popular song lyrics, web narratives (blogs), internet discourse," and other multimodal texts (Carter, 2007). As well, there is a strong focus on texts that emerge from the oral literary tradition: riddles, folktales, and so on. We certainly see this diversity of text types reflected very well in the KCSE English syllabus.

Thinking about all the complex arguments above, particularly about the way that the literature we read and the languages we speak shape our views of reality, as well as the growing movement toward including a range of text types in language and literature classrooms, the following questions arise for teachers of language and literature:

⚠ Activities and Questions

- What are appropriate texts for your students to read?
- What factors influence choices of text in the local context?
- Are those factors external (beyond teacher control) or internal (a matter of personal preference or professional discretion)?

- Is there any allowance for professional discretion in selecting texts that may be relevant to students in the local teaching context (that is, do local teachers bring in local content, such as new articles or oral stories, or do they tend to stick to set texts and approved textbooks)?
- In your opinion, are there any biases evident in the selection of texts represented in approved textbooks, set texts, and school-leaving papers? (See Appendix A for a list of set texts for 2017 and 2018, as well as examples of texts included in school-leaving papers.)
- What is "decolonisation"? If it were possible, how would you go about "decolonising" the English curriculum in your classroom?

Writing Rationales

In some settings, resources are limited. Teachers are restricted to teaching what is available, and often what is available is limited copies of approved texts. At the moment you may have little opportunity to make your own selections of literature; at some point, however, if you continue on a life journey of teaching, you may find yourself in a classroom where you have the opportunity to make literary selections. Whether or not you have a choice of texts, it is a good exercise to think through why particular texts may be important to teach. An important process in planning instruction is to select a text you would like to teach and to write a *rationale* for why this is an appropriate text for your setting and for the students you teach, considering their age, ability, interests, social context, and so on. Read the following information on how to write a teaching rationale for language and literature classrooms. Rationales are required or recommended in many secondary school contexts around the globe and so it is important to have some knowledge of how they are prepared.

What is a Rationale?[4]

A rationale is an articulation of the reasons for using a particular literary text, film, or teaching method. Minimally, a rationale should include:

- a bibliographic citation and the intended audience
- a brief summary of the work and its educational significance
- the purposes of using the work and how it will be used
- potential problems with the work and how these can be handled
- alternative works an individual student might read or view

Rationales should be well thought out, avoid specialized technical jargon, be specific and thorough, and written so that they will be readily understood by teachers.

Why Develop a Rationale?

Rationale development is part of thoughtful planning for classroom instruction. If we have not reflected on why we teach what we teach, we will be unprepared to meet the needs and challenges of our students and to respond to potential complaints, either from parents or from others in the community who seek to influence the curriculum.

Guidelines for Writing a Rationale

The role of the rationale is to provide a written statement of teachers' best professional perspective on their curriculum. The following is included:

- **Bibliographic citation.** Include the author's name, complete title, publisher, publication date, and edition.
- **Intended audience.** The rationale should articulate the type of class and the range of grade levels at which the text will be used. The rationale should indicate whether the text is going to be used for individual study, small-group work, or whole-class study, along with an explanation of reasons for why the text is being used.

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4 This section is adapted and abridged from Brown, J.E. (1994, April). SLATE Starter Sheet for Writing Rationales. National Council of Teachers of English. Retrieved, 23 February 2017, from: http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Involved/Action/Rationale_HowtoWrite.pdf

- **A brief summary of the work.** The summary provides an overview for anyone who chooses to read it, and can also reflect aspects of a work that the teacher considers most important, as well as aspects that relate to its educational significance.
- **The relationship of the text to the program.** Reading a text is not an isolated educational experience; as a part of the total program, the text should be consistent with the ongoing objectives of the class.
- **The impact of the text.** One of the significant arguments for any work is the ways in which it will open new perspectives to its readers. In determining the reasons for using a text, teachers should also consider the potential impact it will have on students' behavior or attitudes.
- **Potential problems with the work.** The reflective process of developing a rationale is an opportunity for anticipating uses of language, actions, and situations in a work that might be the source of challenges. Additionally, as teachers examine potential problems, they have the opportunity to make decisions about how to address the problems, establishing a framework that supports the text's quality and strengths.
- **Information about the text and supplementary information.** If possible, it is useful to collect literature that references the text (e.g., critical commentaries, published book reviews, and biographical information about the author, especially if it includes any critical assessment of the author's work).
- **Related or alternative texts.** If possible, develop a list of related titles on similar topics that might serve either as an alternatives or supplements. This will help you develop thematic units (units that include literature focused on a particular theme, such as "bravery" or "caring for others"), encourage students to read related material, or suggest similar texts at different reading levels.
- Note: In some settings, it will be difficult to gather the sorts of supplementary information and related texts suggested above. Modify your approach as suitable for your context.

Pre-Course Assignment

Below is the pre-course assignment. Consider that writing rationales can also be an interesting and important exercise for students. Students, for example, may write a rationale giving reasons why a favourite text should be taught in school. Don't let them get away with saying, "it should be taught because it's an approved text" (and don't use that argument yourself, because it an uncritical approach). Good teachers always consider the relevance and suitability of texts for their students, evaluating resources with particular attention to the local context. Even set texts are routinely challenged by parents or administrators. For example, *Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera has been a set text for Form IV since 2012. Shortly after its addition to the set text list, it was challenged by Kenyan Education minister Mutula Kilonzo, sparking a heated debate on text selection. The minister complained that the book is inappropriate for school students because it contains statements and words associated with same-sex relationships. Even though this content is very minor, to the extent that it goes unnoticed by most readers, the Education Minister declared that "Kenya is not ready for such a curriculum."[5] As a teacher, you should be able justify – for students, parents, and administrators – the educational and literary value of all texts you teach. If you were in the middle of teaching *Whale Rider* and the book was challenged (which was the case for many Kenyan teachers in 2013), how would you defend your choice?

⚠ Pre-course Assignment Instructions

1. Choose a **text** or **film** that you think your students would benefit from reading or viewing in English class. Your selection may be 1) a favourite passage from one of the set texts, 2) a riddle, folktale, or poem from the oral tradition, 3) an excerpt from an article or news story; 4) another work that you would like to see included in Forms I-IV, or added to the list of set texts.

2. Write your name and student number at the top of the assignment.

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5   See Sigei, J. (2013, 4 January). Minister Seeks School Ban over Gay Link. *Daily Nation*. *Whale Rider* has been replaced by John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* in the set text list for 2018.

3. Provide information about the source of your selection. In the case of published work, you will name the author, title, publisher and date; in the case of oral stories or riddles, provide details as to the origin of your selection.

4. If the selection is short (e.g., a poem or riddle), type it out in full. If your selection is long (e.g., a novel or short story), summarize it. If your text is not in English (e.g., a riddle or folktale from your childhood), translate it to English.

5. Write a rationale for teaching this text. Prepare a one-page statement (roughly 400-500 words) explaining your reasons for teaching your literature selection. Do not use point form. For the purpose of this assignment, you should include the following information:

   - the intended audience (e.g., Would you teach this text in Form I, II, III or IV?)

   - a statement about the text's educational significance

   - the purposes of using the text (e.g., What do you hope students will learn from reading this text and how would you teach those concepts?)

   - potential problems with the text and how these could be handled (e.g., reading level, content, etc.)